



Queen Victoria ascended the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on 20th June 1837. She was granted the additional title of the Empress of India by the British Parliament in 1876 after the colonial rule of India shifted hands from the British East India Company to the Crown in the aftermath of the First War of Independence in 1857 (Goldfinch 2021). Upon her passing on 22nd January 1901, the Sheriff of Bombay, Sir Jamshetjee Jejeebhoy, spearheaded the collection of funds 'to perpetuate in a suitable way the memory of the Empress' glorious long life' which would be used for charitable activities or the advancement of technological and industrial education and research (Dwivedi et al., 6). The public had raised an astounding 2,53,800 rupees for the Victoria Memorial Fund. On 14th February 1902, Bombay's most eminent citizens met in the Bombay Municipal Corporation Hall to decide how to utilise these funds to honour Queen Victoria's memory. Eventually, they decided to set up a school for the visually impaired, run by a Committee of Management 'to ameliorate the condition of the blind' with Governor Lord Northcote promising Government financial support to the institution (Dwivedi et al., 7).

The school was to provide free education, lodging and clothing to visually impaired boys. Preliminary research was conducted to study how such a school may be best run and it was decided that school would be conducted in Marathi and Gujarati, the primary languages spoken in the Bombay Presidency and English would be added only when necessary. (Dwivedi et al., 8). It was the first institution of its kind in India and set a precedent for many other activities that would elevate and aid visually impaired children. Motivated by a belief that regardless of economic or social background, all students deserve the opportunity to expand their horizons, the school was formally launched in the presence of the Governor, Lord Northcote (Newsletter 2019, VMSB).



The school rented out different locations in Bombay before moving into its current location. A house was rented at the foot of the Bellasis Bridge with the first classes beginning on 13th November 1902. Dr. Nilkanthrai Dayabhai, civil servant and visually impaired himself, who had established a blind school of his own in Ahmedabad was appointed as Principal (Dwivedi et al., 8-9). In 1904, the school shifted briefly to Chinchpokly in Parel as a case of the plague had been detected in Tardeo. They returned to the house at Bellasis Bridge in May 1905, but conditions in the house had only worsened leading to illnesses. The search for a new premises took quite some time, but they eventually purchased a large property belonging to Dayabhai Tapidas at Tardeo measuring 7,500 square yards with a bungalow and outhouse (Dwivedi et al., 11-12).

Shapoorjee N Chandabhoy and Company designed the school building. Governor Sydenham Clarke and Lady Clarke were invited to the foundation laying ceremony on 13th March 1912. Lady Clarke commended the school and said, "In the nine years of the existence of the school a vast amount of comfort, happiness and hope must have been brought into the lives of many..." (Dwivedi et al., 19). The new building was inaugurated on 2nd April 1914 by the then Governor of Bombay, Lord Willingdon. The imposing structure perched on the edges of Tardeo had a classical façade with stucco ornamentation gilded with a portico and stained glass panels, enveloped by beautiful gardens. An important feature of the school is a portrait medallion of Queen Victoria sculpted by G. K. Mhatre in 1917 (Dwivedi et al., 21). The school has been bestowed the Indian Heritage Society's Urban Heritage Award in 1992 and 2001 ("Our Heritage" VMSB).



On 8th October 1903, a resolution was passed placing the school's funds in the hands of a Trust. The school's first trustees included Sir Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, Hon. Mr S. Rebsch and Hon. Mr Ibrahim Rahimtoola, eminent civil servants, Sir Bhalchandra Krishna Bhatavadekar, a distinguished doctor, P. R. Cadell, historian and civil servant, and Sir Sassoon Jacob David, textile magnate. The Trust comprised Parsi, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim leaders of the time, leading to a cosmopolitan and secular school, a tradition that is carefully maintained even today. Other illustrious personalities who have served the school include R P Masani, historian and banker Madhavjee D Thackersey, mill owner and philanthropist, and Dinsha Edulji, freedom fighter and politician. J. B. Petit, nationalist and philanthropist, served as Honorary Secretary, and Sir Pherozezshah Mehta, politician and lawyer, was part of the Management committee. The Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court acts as the ex-officio chairperson (Newsletter 2019, VMSB). Mahatma Gandhi visited the school in 1924, and Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi in 1951. They encouraged the school's relentless efforts to create a brighter future for all, unhindered by their economic or physical backgrounds ("Our Heritage" VMSB). Other luminaries who have visited the school include Helen Keller and former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam.

The school presently offers free-of-cost education comprising holistic vocational training, computer literacy programs and extracurricular activities such as musical training, field trips, sports and handicrafts. The school focuses on cultivating moral behaviour and good character. (Newsletter 2019, VMSB) It follows the SSC curriculum up to eighth grade in the Marathi medium and further guides students enrolling into mainstream schools for the rest of their schooling ("Our Academic Programme" VMSB). The sprawling campus comprises the VMS Learning Centre, the VMS-Radha Subrahmanian Centre for Computer Education, the Navnit Shah Library and Resource Centre and the VMS-Vijay Merchant Centre for Life Skills and Development.

Over the years, the school's prestige and its facilities have only grown. The Navnit Shah library has more than 800 visually impaired members from across the city who can avail of braille, audio and print books and JAWS-enabled computers that offer online classes for the civil service competitive examinations. The VMS Learning Centre was a day school started in collaboration with the Special Needs Centre of the SNDT Women's University in 1999 to provide academic, functional and pre-vocational training. The Vijay Merchant Centre is the school's in-house therapy centre, offering comprehensive diagnostic, occupational, speech and communication, counselling, and remedial and art-based therapies. The campus also includes a boardroom, seminar hall, amphitheatre and central hall, namely the Standard Chartered Conference Centre, which is rented out to various organisations to raise funds. (Newsletter 2019, VMSB).

The school has worked tirelessly for over a century to provide opportunities for stellar education and rehabilitation for the differently abled. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the school employed teachers and had parent training programs, distributing devices to those in need to further their mission of education even amid a global pandemic (Newsletter 2020, VMSB). Over the years, the school has focused on providing differently abled children with support to help them grow into independent and skilled individuals, staying true to the vision with which the school began 110 years ago. When asked about their heritage, the staff at the School humbly dismisses any notions of recognition or fame. They simply want to be known as a place that serves the visually impaired.



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